Reconciliation of Heart and Soul

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Reconciliation of Heart and Soul

by sarcastic_fi

Summary

AU: Will and Hannibal were 'happily' married until circumstances separated them, call it work related stress, marital problems or other. Will came down with encephalitis and ended up taking a forced vacation in a mental institute. This story picks up once he has been released with a clean bill of health. Will is trying to win back his adopted daughter Abigail, but not his husband Hannibal. Of course, Hannibal isn't going to make it easy, especially when he wants Will back.

Notes

Features: awesome best friends Will and Bev!
: lots of therapy
: younger than canon Abigail
: adultery - Hannibal/Alana (pre story), and eventually Will/Matthew but still with end game Hannibal/Will
: no knowledge of the legal system and ignoring facts to suit my purpose (aka there is no reason that I know of that Will would have been in a mental health institute just because he had encephalitis, but it suits my plot and is fairly close to canon so....)

This is a WIP but over half of it is finished. I think it will be in five parts but may only end up in four.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

“Mr Graham, please, come in,” Bedelia De Maurier was nothing like Will had pictured, and yet upon sight of her he couldn't imagine her being anything less than exactly what she was. Her hair was expensively coiffed, clothing selected from the finest tailors and there was something in her mannerism that reminded Will of Hannibal. He wanted that to make him uncomfortable, instead it seemed to ease something inside his chest and he found himself relaxing, at least as much as he was capable of, into her pricey leather couch. “I'm glad you could make it.”

“Well, I didn't have much choice. Weekly visits to a psychiatrist was one of the conditions of my release from the institute,” Will advised bitterly.

“You could have chosen any psychiatrist; what made you select me?” She asked, and Will genuinely couldn't tell if she was asking because she wanted to know for her own sake or because she thought it would reveal something about Will's own motivations.

Will shrugged. “It's unusual, considering you're more than just acquainted with Hannibal, but it also makes things a bit easier for me, you having that knowledge already. How is it that we haven't met before this, Dr du Maurrier? I seem to recall you were invited to the wedding.”

She inclined her head slightly. “I am much stricter about the crossing the line when it comes to my relationships than Hannibal is. He is quick to blur things, but I believe in maintaining my ground.”

“You've known him a long time,” Will observed.

“We were colleagues long before we become doctor and patient.”

“Before I met him, even.”

“Yes,” she confirmed coolly, before reminding him firmly, “we aren't here to talk about my relationship with Hannibal.”

“Well I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about mine, not just yet.”

“Then we will leave the topic alone until the wound has scabbed over some. Do you want to talk about your daughter, instead?”

“Abigail,” Will breathed the name like a man taking his first gulp of air after almost drowning. She was his lifesaver, and he missed her more than he had ever missed anyone. “I want to see her.”

“Are you being denied visitation?”

Will's face contorted at the word. “'Visitation'! I'm her father, I have as much of a right to see her as he does, but I'm being asked to jump through hoops before anyone will even let me in

the same room as her."

"You feel that is unreasonable."

"I feel like it's unfair, but I understand why they are doing it."

"And what reason do you understand that to be?"

"I hurt her." The words escaped Will's mouth with their own kind of pain. Thinking about how he had scared and hurt his daughter while under the influence of encephalitis was like self harm. Will didn't remember the act, but he recalled vividly the look of fear that had enlarged Abigail's bright blue eyes. He couldn't forgive himself.

"How do you feel about that?"

"Guilty. Pained."

"How do you think she feels?"

Will shrugged, his jaw tense. "Like I don't love her; and that's not true."

Bedelia nodded, her delicate perfectly manicured fingernail brushing her lip as she lent her chin into her hand. "Is your desire for sole custody based on your wish for her to understand your love for her, or does it come from a darker place, perhaps one where you want to punish your husband?"

"Do I want to punish Hannibal? I never really thought about it from that angle. How I would love to see him suffer the same indignity he wrought upon me... but no, Abigail isn't a part of that. I just think she'd be better off without him."

Again, that enigmatic nod. "Are you better off without him?"

"I am... better," he said, as if testing how the word felt rolling off of his tongue. "I'm going to be better."

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Will met Hannibal at a crime scene. The death had been particularly gruesome and Will wanted to wash his skull out with battery acid to remove the repugnant thoughts that Will imagined had filled the murderer's head as he was committing the act. Jack had touched his shoulder, making Will jump and reach instinctively for a gun he no longer carried and wouldn't have used. Still, the gesture was enough to have Jack walking on egg shells and insisting that he go home and 'get some sleep, Graham, you're making the victim look healthy'. Callous, but honest. Jack was sometimes too much. In fact, Jack was always too much, and no matter how much Will respected the man for his drive he wouldn't allow himself to forget the sacrifices Jack would happily make if it meant catching the next one just a few moments sooner. The sacrifice, of course, being Will's sanity.

Will had been about to snap something defensive and probably stupid when a heavily accented voiced floated from behind him. "I am more than happy to escort you to your

residence, if I may?”

Will had regarded the tall older man with all the distrust of a mouse approaching a hungry cat. It wasn't personal, Will treated everyone like that to begin with. He had found it was safer than the alternative. “Who are you? Jack, who is he? You shouldn't be here, it's a crime scene.”

“Relax, Graham. Dr Lecter here was recommended by Dr Bloom. He's assisting the FBI.”

“Doesn't mean I need his assistance,” Will had replied, not intending to insult but not caring if he did.

Dr Lecter had not been phased. “Do you bite every hand that feeds, Mr Graham, or just the one's belonging to psychiatrists?”

“You sound more curious than offended,” Will observed dryly. He sighed, tired, wet and about an hour away from shutting down entirely. If this man was the quickest way out of here then so be it. He had endured worse for a far lesser reward. “Fine, you can drive me. Just... no psychoanalysing me. You wouldn't like me when I'm psychoanalysed.”

“Perhaps you are underestimating me, but for now I concede to your request. My car is this way,” the doctor had smoothly agreed. Will had been tight lipped on the way home, unwilling to give any of himself away to the stranger.

If someone asked Will he would describe the relationship from then onwards as a snowballing effect, slowly and then all at once. That first night he'd practically fallen out of the car in eagerness to get away from Hannibal, but a sudden attack of guilt at his lack of manners had him offering Hannibal a drink. The man hadn't accepted, but he'd left him with a promise of a rain check. In the early days Will felt little more than obligation to spend time with Hannibal, which spiralled into curiosity to why Hannibal wanted to spend time with him. Jack and Alana both encouraged their budding friendship until one day it was more than friendship. Will missed Hannibal if he didn't get the chance to see his exquisitely chiselled face with it's stretched smile and luminous blood-brown eyes, he longed for the sound of Hannibal's carefully enunciated consonants and melodic Lithuanian vowels. The emotion happened long before sex did, and marriage seemed like a natural step to take once they had experienced every other intimacy available to them. It took going crazy and a year of separation for Will to understand that it had never been a slow and gentle romance that built with speed to it's natural climax. Hannibal had employed manipulative techniques from the very first moment of meeting. In essence, Hannibal had dug his hooks into Will from day one and he had never known a moment of clarity or freedom since. He had just never realised it until he almost died.

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“What made you adopt Abigail?”

“Specifically?” Will assumed she wouldn't ask such a simplistic question as to why, not when the answer to that was staring her right in the face. Two men could not conceive and the idea of inviting a woman into their relationship to carry their child had been unbearable. “Abigail was seven when we first saw her. Her parents had died months before; a murder-suicide. The social worker who brought us to the foster centre had no intention of mentioning her, but where other people had seen damaged goods we saw something outstanding. Abigail was brave, intelligent, innocent and a survivor. We knew she belonged with us from the moment we sat her down to talk to her.”

“She felt the same way?”

“I want to say yes, but that might be wishful thinking on my part. She was an orphan facing eleven years of foster situations with no one to care if she succeeded in life. The idea of leaving with anyone appealed to her, and I know she quickly became attached to Hannibal. He always has been subtly charismatic.”

“Do you resent the fact she attached herself to him so quickly?”

“No, never. I think she felt my desperation. Hannibal always said he was indifferent to the idea of raising a child and would not have considered it had I not been so taken with the idea. All I wanted was to give Abigail all of my love and make sure that nothing ever hurt her the way her birth parents did. We became close when she started having nightmares. We thought it was a sign we were doing something wrong, but Alana.... Dr Bloom said it was a good thing, that her sub-conscious had relaxed enough around us to start working out the trauma of her recent past while she slept. It meant that on some level she trusted us not to leave. I was the one to get up with her during the night.”

“You knew what it was like to wake up afraid,” she intuited.

“I still do.”

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An alarm woke him in the early hours.

No, not an alarm. Will no longer set one since he had no employment. His sleep was often disturbed and erratic so he allowed the light of day to dictate when he woke up in the morning rather than relying on a set time. It wasn't necessarily the best way to go about getting back into his routine, but he had just come from an environment where his every second was regimented, so he wasn't too concerned with losing those constraints. Still, it didn't change the fact that a shrill ringing was rousing him from sleep.

His hand reached out blindly to locate his cell phone on the bedside table. Winston, a stray that Will had picked up and rehomed recently, barked at the usual sound. His house was normally a sanctuary of silence.

“Graham,” Will barked into the phone, an on-coming headache and the unwelcome phone call making him more irritable than would be considered tolerable to those in polite society. He could practically see Hannibal's grimace at his lack of decorum.

“Please don't hang up.”

Will sat up in bed with a start. “Alana,” he said her name grimly, like wiping dog shit off of a shoe.

Her wince was almost palpable. “I know I'm the last person you want to hear from-”

“Second to last, don't flatter yourself,” Will choked out a painful laugh.

“I had hoped that wasn't the case. I never meant to come between you both.”

“Really? Then you should have tried harder not to fuck him.”

“I know, Will! I know. It's a failure that will burden me forever. I lost so much for something so ephemeral; your trust, his respect, self-respect, the friendship we shared. God Will, I can't turn back time.”

Will had thought it would make him happy to hear her suffering, instead he was just reminded how fallible they all were. It made him tired enough to want to crawl back under the covers and wait until the stars lit up the sky again, so he could stare out at the darkness and feel completely insignificant. “Alana, why did you call? It wasn't to apologise, or to assuage your guilt; a trip to the rehabilitation centre could have achieved either of those. Why now?”

“This phone call isn't about how I feel, Will, you're right. It isn't even about what happened in the past. It's about Abigail.”

“You've got my attention.”

“Meet me outside. We could go for a walk?”

“You're here now?”

“I tried knocking, no one answered so I thought you were out.”

“No, I was asleep.”

“Asleep? Will, it's almost two in the afternoon.”

Will blinked, his mind greyed and he felt control slipping away from him. My name is Will Graham, I'm in Wolf Trap, Virginia and it's... 1:43 in the afternoon. I was asleep, I did not lose time. Everything is going to be okay. “Sorry,” he whispered hoarsely. “I didn't sleep well last night. I think I over compensated a bit too much. Give me ten and I'll meet you on the porch.”

Will dressed in a hurry; a tee-shirt that used to be white before time had greyed it, the least odorous flannel shirt he could find and a pair of jeans without any visible dirt on them. A quick splash of cold water to finish the job the ringing phone started and a generous amount of cologne from a bottle with a ship on it, something he'd gotten from Jack for Christmas before all this had happened. He deemed himself presentable and shoved his socked feet into some heavy duty walking boots before opening the front door. Winston and his two companions, each as mangy as the other, dashed out into the cool afternoon sun and started running around with an abundance of energy. Will left them to it, he only had eyes for Alana.

She looked good; slim as ever with her dark hair left lose around her face, the bare minimum of make up and a turquoise dress under her black woollen coat. Elegance without the vanity of sophistication, someone who appeared as trustworthy as she was intelligent and beautiful. “Hello Will.”

“Hello Alana.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, the kind he used to enjoy with her, and walked along the earthy path into the woods that lay on the outskirts of his farm. He used to feel so at ease in her presence, and she was one of the only people who had had that effect on him. Despite her profession he had never felt like she was examining every word and pause of their conversation for insight into his brilliant but brilliantly flawed mind. It had been a rare gift, one that she had rejected in the cruellest of ways.

“I heard about the custody battle.”

“Are you here on his behalf to convince me to drop the petition?”

“No, I told you I lost his respect the day I slept with him and, as a result, his friendship too. I'm here on Abigail's behalf. I'm still her therapist, only by virtue of the years I spent building up our relationship prior to my abysmal lapse in judgement.”

“So, on her behalf then?” He said to himself, concluding that Abigail didn't want him to win back his parental rights over her. She was thirteen years old now, probably a precarious and wilful teenager, but also likely one who was attempting to avoid being hurt; and Will had hurt her.

“Not explicitly. Will, have you even spoken to Hannibal since you were hospitalised?”

“I haven't spoken to my husband since the night I found your necklace in our bed,” it wasn't the literal truth, but Will wasn't sure that shouting insults and painfully polite exchanges for Abigail's benefit counted in context of their discussion.

To her credit Alana didn't flinch. She did, however, take a deep breath and let the moment wash over them both. She didn't do well with conflict, and there was too much between them for them to calmly verbalise their thoughts without it becoming a war of remorse and bitterness. “Did he try to visit you?”

“Three times. I believe a nurse let him in while I was sleeping at the hospital. I woke up and told him to get out and never come back. When I was at the rehabilitation centre I asked them

not to allow him in. Since I was under their care they had to respect my wishes, at least in regards to visitation."

"He gave up?"

"Hannibal never gives up. Surrender isn't in his vocabulary, which is ironic considering almost every other word under the sun seems to be." Will allowed a wry smile to escape for an instant before schooling his features again. "He simply retreated in order to restrategize."

"And what do you think his new strategy is, Will?"

"To not allow me to see my daughter unless I agree to see him as well."

"You think he's holding her hostage over your separation?" Alana sounded incredulous, but then Will was criticizing the man she idealised for the majority of her adult life. Alana had been Hannibal's protégée in the same way that Will had been Jack's. It was hard to see a hero for a man. Will had been forced to see Jack as human by virtue of the work they did. Alana had never allowed the blinkers to be removed where Hannibal was concerned, because admitting he wasn't perfect meant admitting she could never be perfect and she wasn't ready to understand that the insane expectations she placed on herself were just as damaging as the mistake she had made.

"I spoke to my lawyer. Ms. Lounds says that unless I agree to Hannibal being there when I visit with Abigail then it's doubtful I will ever see her again."

"He's just being a good parent, Will. Cautious. Can you blame him after everything that happened?"

"I don't think I'm ready to talk about blame with you yet, Alana."

She nodded. "Please Will, please consider his conditions. Abigail needs you in her life."

"She said that?"

"She would never," Alana almost laughed at the idea. "She's angry, Will, and two seconds away from full blown puberty which will only exacerbate the emotional instability she's feeling. She misses you, so much, but she's so hurt that you left."

"I didn't want to: I was forced to leave."

"You separated before I got involved, there's a history here and it's not my place to insert myself in it. I just need you to promise that you're going to do everything you can to see her, even if it means sacrificing your pride for her."

"It's not my first choice, but it seems I'm always the one to make the compromises. I'll do whatever it takes, it's a promise to Abigail."

Alana nodded, graceful in victory. Their walk ended not long after, both of them circling back to Will's house and Alana climbing into her car with a farewell wave and driving off. Will found he hated her a little less.

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“Dad?” Abigail's voice managed to both break Will's heart and mend his soul all in one syllable. He'd been nervous before, petrified of being rejected by the one reason he had made it out of the rehabilitation centre whole.

“Hey, baby,” Will said softly. He was afraid to come to close, but he hoped she didn't take that as reluctance. He tried to enthuse as much love and affection into his voice as he could.

Abigail looked at Hannibal, who stood two foot behind her wearing his usual mask of impassivity, and then approached Will carefully. Two steps away from him and Will couldn't bare it; he opened his arms and she threw herself into them, clinging on to him as fiercely as her young body could. Will just cradled her in his arms, content to kneel there on the ground outside of the house he used to call home with the smell of his daughter filling up all his empty spaces and reminding him what it felt like to be human and to love.

“It's cold. You should come inside,” Hannibal said, interrupting Will's calm.

Will went to release Abigail but the girl squeezed him tightly. He smiled into her neck, “I'm not going anywhere,” he promised. She failed to respond so he carefully stood up with her and carried her inside. She was getting too tall for this, but he didn't mind.

Hannibal did. He frowned in their direction, and while he didn't outright object his comment was hardly an approval. “You should be more careful, William. You've not long recovered from a serious illness.”

“My mind was on fire, Hannibal, and I've been physically well for months.” The frown didn't dissipate; they both knew that even if Will was at death's door that he would carry Abigail anywhere she wanted. He had always been prone to overindulging her, something Hannibal wouldn't stand for.

“I'm sorry,” Abigail apologised. “Sorry, Tėti.” She turned her bright baby blues on the family disciplinarian and Hannibal sighed.

“All I ask if that you are mindful, Abigail.”

“Yes, Tėti.”

“Are you going to be around for my entire visit?” Will asked as they made their way from the foyer to the refined décor of the dining room and then the tasteful lounge.

“It is not my intention to censor your visit,” Hannibal said, reading Will's suspicions with ease that Will resented. Will had the empathy to understand anyone, but his husband was a closed book. “Abigail, I will be in the study if you need me. Will, I would appreciate a word before you go.”

“The lawyers-”

“Please Will,” Hannibal interrupted again. “This is a difficult enough situation. Lets not make it harder by hiding behind lawyers when a simple conversation could move things forward.”

Will nodded, eager to have Hannibal leave. Besides, there was no point in avoiding him forever. Now that they had had this initial interaction the idea of spending time with Hannibal seemed less daunting. Like believing there is a monster under the bed and refusing to check until you can stand it no more, and finally seeing that it had all been in your imagination. The fear he'd had of seeing Hannibal again had built over their estrangement until it had become disproportionate. Will realised now that he could deal with his husband if he had to.

The door closed and Will smiled at his daughter. “Now, tell me why you let your tėtis redecorate the lounge again?”

Abigail rolled her eyes and giggled a little, starting in on an entertaining story of why the colour of the walls had to change and the position of the furniture just wasn't right. For Will it wasn’t the content of the conversation but the sound of her voice and the genuine warmth he heard in it. He didn't think either of them were ready to discuss what had happened the last time they saw each other, it was too raw for them both, but the casual conversation allowed them to re-establish their bond without picking at the scabs of their wounds.

“Do you have to go?” Abigail asked as Will gathered his coat an hour later.

“For now, but I'll be back on Thursday.” The deal was twice weekly visits, once on a weekend like today and again after school. Thursday had been chosen because it was the only day that Abigail wasn't signed up for extra-curricular activities. Swimming on Mondays, Tuesday was a private tutor for her French, on Wednesdays she had debate club, and Fridays were for her school friends, something Will had insisted on back when Will had been part of the decision making process in Abigail's life.

“Okay,” Abigail said, closing herself off now that she faced the reality of Will leaving, even if for a short amount of time. “Goodbye, Dad.”

“I'll leave my cell number with your Tėti, okay. You'll be able to call me any time you want to. Any time,” he promised as a consolation prize.

“Really?” She breathed.

“Any time. All the time, if your father can stand the phone bill!” Will smiled as the return of a smile on her face. “And if he can't, prank call me and I'll call you back as soon as I see it.” He hugged her, kissing to top of her silky brown hair. “I love you, Abigail.”

“Love you too, Dad,” she murmured and headed off to her bedroom. It was Sunday night and she undoubtedly had homework to complete before school tomorrow. No matter how hard Hannibal tried to instil a fierce work ethic in her she was ever independent and a teenager rebelling in the small ways. Hannibal should consider himself lucky that their daughter chose leaving her homework to the last moment over smoking or boys to challenge him.

Will steeled himself and knocked briskly on the door to Hannibal's study. He heard the sound of Hannibal's expensive leather loafers padding across the polished hardwood floor before the door was opened and Will found himself invited inside his husband's inner sanctum. Will's eyes roamed around the room, taking in the garnet walls and ebony trim. This was where

Hannibal retreated to when even his kitchen wasn't enough of a haven for him. “You wanted to speak to me?”

“I've been trying to speak to you for months, Will, you rebuffed me.”

“I had no interest in hearing your justifications for actions I haven't forgiven you for.”

“I am to assume from the tone of your voice that in that respect nothing has changed?” Hannibal asked. Will's expression was enough of an answer for him. “Fine. May I ask why it is you have decided I am an unfit parent to our daughter? Or is your inability to allow me a defend myself affecting your judgement in this issue?”

“You think I'm being spiteful?”

“I think you aren't able to think clearly, or you never would have gone to Freddie Lounds. She's a snake, Will, more interested in the celebrity of the situation than a resolution in Abigail's best interest.”

“She's only as heinous as the next lawyer who makes their living off of other people's pain.”

“Lounds is worse. She tried to have us both removed as Abigail's guardians when we first adopted her.”

“Which is why I knew she would take my case.”

“You aren't going to win, but I have a way we could both win.”

“Oh?” Will asked, sceptical in the extreme.

“Come home, Will. Come back to me where you belong.”

Will's heart didn't stop, but he did feel as though someone's tight fist was squeezing every drop of blood out of it until the muscle started to atrophy and die. He imagined it, as he had so many times before: Slipping back into the familiar habits of allowing Hannibal to dictate everything in his life, from the time of day he woke to the food he ingested and the people he sought company with. He pictured himself sat at that dining room table with Abigail opposite him and Hannibal at the head, comfortable but never really happy, a part of his aching in loneliness even as his husband leaned in to kiss him. “I have to go. I'll be back on Thursday at seven-thirty.”

Hannibal inclined his head, seeming satisfied enough that he had shocked his husband. Will quickly escaped the house and climbed into his car, starting the engine and driving back to Wolf Trap on autopilot. That night he didn't sleep at all, haunted by the man who had once promised to love him, to cherish him, until death parted them.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

thank you so much for all the kudos and comments and bookmarks!

“You've had a busy week, Mr Graham. Is there a particular place you wish to start our conversation?” Dr du Maurier began their weekly session.

“At the end?” Will suggested, half joking. Du Maurier didn't react, but Will knew she had made a mental note of his attitude. “I saw Alana, made a bargain with Hannibal, got to hug my daughter again and then had all of my hard work to remain calm and in control undone by Hannibal's verbalisation of his desire to see me return to him.”

“This surprised you, that he should wish for a reconciliation?”

“He cheated on me with one of our closest friends. There was nothing about that event that screamed 'I love you' to me, so yes, I was... caught off guard.”

“How long has it been since you allowed your husband to catch you off guard?”

“The easy answer would be since he slept with Alana.”

“And the hard answer?”

“I have been guarded in Hannibal's presence ever since he started to make it known that he disapproved of my career.”

“He wanted you to be a stay at home parent?”

“I'm not sure what the alternative was, it was never discussed in terms of what else I would do, so long as it wasn't working for Jack Crawford.”

“What was it about your job that Hannibal didn't like?”

“He said it made me someone else, and I knew what he meant. It didn't negate all the good I was doing, all the lives I could help Jack save.”

“What about your life?” She asked, inadvertently echoing Hannibal.

Will stared at the window. He felt trapped, the same way he had been feeling when he made the choice to separate from Hannibal; pulled in two directions without a tether to himself. Back then he had most likely been suffering from the onset of chronic encephalitis, at least according to the time-line that the doctor had proposed, but it didn't make his decision any

less his own. When conflict had arisen between the two great passions of Will's life, he had chosen to remove himself from the situation. For a month he had stayed at a hotel, ignoring calls from Hannibal and Jack alike. Eventually Jack had tracked him down, made him look at the faces of the people who were dying, made him look into the mind of their killer until Will couldn't help but track him down and see him arrested. He guessed some part of him resented that Jack had gotten to him first. Hannibal had assumed he would come back, but he had made no effort to ensure this happened. Will was very probably being too harsh, but that acknowledgement didn't change the way he felt.

“My life has always come second to something.”

“Have you always felt this way? What about with your parents?”

“Ah,” Will huffed bitterly. “Especially with my parents. I was born in Louisiana, but after my mom left when I was seven we moved around a lot. My dad fixed boat engines, he was a genius at it, showed me how to fix them too. I wasn't second in his life, more like fifth. Boats, alcohol, women, guns and dogs all made the cut before me.”

“And Hannibal?”

“He is the epitome of sophistication. I never understood what drew him to me, but I always feared it was my 'unique' thinking. To this day I'm still afraid to ask. I think that was why I never fought harder to be independent of his life; he was the one who chose the restaurants on the few occasions that he trusted someone else to cook his meals, he was the one who proposed... I moved into his house. I think Abigail was the first time I ever strived for something for myself, and having gotten the gift of her in our lives I still knew that I came second in her eyes. Not that she loved me any less, just that Hannibal and her shared a bond built on something other than the experience of coping with trauma. So yes, when he tried to assert control over the one area of my life that he didn't already automatically have first and last say, I chaffed.”

“Is there anyone in your life who isn't attached, in one way or another, to Hannibal Lecter?”

Will paused for thought. It wasn't that he didn't have friends, it was just that he didn't like to make them. Meeting new people made him feel uncomfortable, and vice versa. He knew all the social cues that encouraged people to open up, he had made use of them during his time as a cop before Abigail's presence in their life had him retiring. Still, he didn't employ them in everyday life. He avoided eye contact, would accidentally mimic how they spoke in a way that went further than just the new kid trying to fit in. He made people shy away from him and he did it all because he didn't care enough not to. Hannibal had been different, his eccentricities had intrigued rather than repelled him. There was one person he couldn't link to Hannibal. One person who had always been honest and open with him, to such an extent that he would happily count her among his friends; Beverly Katz.

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They met in a diner; the kind of place Hannibal wouldn't touch a fork in, let alone consume the food that had been prepared here. Will had grown up on the road and to him small, greasy

diners smelt like the comfort of home and the promise of a hot meal after a hard day's manual labour in the cold ocean air.

“I was surprised to get your call,” Beverly announced as she sat down opposite him. She didn't look happy to see him.

“You think I'm a jackass for not calling sooner,” Will guessed.

She gave him her patented stare. “You are a jackass for not calling sooner.”

“I brought you a double cheese burger with chilli fries and a soda to apologise.”

“Asshole, I'm on a diet.”

“It's a diet cola.”

“Oh, well in that case all is forgiven,” she responded laconically, and took a big gulp of her free drink.

Will smiled genuinely at her. “I missed you.”

“Then, dumbass, next time don't leave it months before calling me,” she responded, but Will heard the forgiveness in her voice. “Now, tell me why you really brought me here.”

He sighed. She was smart and shrewd, both of which he respected about her. “Hannibal told me he wants me back.”

“No fricking way! That's enormous. Of course you told him where to go, right? I mean, you should always start with hard to get, even if you don't mean it.”

“I didn't know what to say, I just kind of panicked and left.”

“He saw you panic?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“You haven't left yourself in the best bargaining position.”

“What am I supposed to be bargaining with?” Will asked, but Beverly was too busy chowing down on her greasy cheesy burger to answer. The expression on her face was one of nirvana, so Will didn't exactly mind the wait.

“With you, of course. You spent your entire relationship giving him whatever he wanted when ever he wanted it. He's made the first move by saying he wants you back. All you have to do is remain strong until you can establish some power over him and then you're gold; you can have it all.”

“All?”

“The husband, the daughter, the job. Whatever you want, kid, it'll all be yours.” Beverly was all of two years his junior, but for as long as Will had known her she was always treating him like he was her baby brother. She was the voice of experience and they both knew it. Will had spent the majority of his formative years being the new boy in school and the more recent time avoiding socialising as much as possible. He'd had sex before he met Hannibal, but he wasn't sure if he had ever really enjoyed it, and it had certainly never been part of a relationship.

“What if I don't want it all?”

Beverly swallowed her bite down fast. “Wait, what? I know you'd never give up Abigail, so that leaves two answers... Will, do you still love Hannibal?”

He grimaced. “It's not that I doubt my feelings about Hannibal, it's just... I don't know if I can get past what he did.”

“It's not just that, though. Come on, tell me, it's what I'm here for!”

“I don't think I can go back to work for Jack, Bev. It almost destroyed me.”

“No, encephalitis nearly killed you, that's different. You're stronger than what your empthy does to you, Will. I have never doubted that.”

“Are you sure? I'm not. It's not that I think I'm going to become them; these people who kill. It's just that I forget who I am sometimes. I get lost.”

“Babe, that's why you need Hannibal. He's always there to remind you who you really are,” Beverly said gently, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

“Is that what he does?” Will mused out loud.

Beverly regarded him with concern. “I'll never let you forget, Will. You can trust me, even if you can't trust yourself.”

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When Will returned to see Abigail on Thursday the biggest concern he had was that Hannibal would turn his desire to see then united into a condition of Will’s continual access to their daughter. To his credit, Hannibal neither mentioned nor alluded to their previous conversation. Like before, he greeted Will amiably at the door and invited him in, leaving Will alone with Abigail once it was clear she was settled enough in his presence. No request was made to see him on the way out, so Will left after two hours with a kiss to Abigail’s forehead and an empty feeling inside. During the month they developed a routine and it seemed that a fragile but definite peace had been reached. Of course, nothing as precarious as that could last.

“Dad, where are you when you aren’t here?” Abigail asked, a fishhook in her hand. They’d spent the last forty five minutes making hooks for Will to use in fishing. He wanted to take

Abigail; like they used to in summer. They'd head out early in the morning, dressed in identical bomber jackets and waterproof boots. Hannibal had, for a time, a framed photograph of Will and Abigail dressed for a fishing trip holding up the catch of the day. They always ate what they caught, learning early on that the idea of killing something and letting it's death go to waste upset Abigail.

"At my house. It's in Wolf Trap Virginia."

"Aren't you lonely, living so far away from us?" She asked tightly, snapping a thread she had been winding.

"I don't like living so far from you, but I don't get lonely, I have Winston to keep me company."

"Who's Winston?"

"He's my dog. Well, there's Winston, Buster, and two others. I found them, all strays in need of a good home."

"Tèti doesn't like dogs," Abigail reminded Will, as if he could ever forget his husband's aversion to keeping pets. It was yet another area of his life where he had to give up something important to him for someone else's sake.

"No."

"Oh," Abigail said, solemn and avoiding his eyes.

"Abigail, what's wrong?"

"Nothing; I just don't want to talk about this anymore," she said snappishly.

"Is there something you do want to talk about?" Will asked, injecting patience into his voice where he felt a headache coming on.

"Not with you."

"Abigail!"

"William!"

"Abigail, I don't think that's appropriate!"

"Why not? You aren't my real dad – you or Hannibal, but at least he stuck around!" She said cruelly before stopping off, the epitome of the over-dramatic teenager.
Will stayed slumped on the floor, defeated by the hurt in Abigail's voice and the guilt weighing heavily on his heart.

"It seems Abigail has stormed off; distraught."

Will didn't look up, not wanting to see his husband's bland non-judgemental expression. Hannibal constantly wore a mask and left to his own devices Will always assumed the worst was going on inside someone else's head. "My fault," he admitted, voice thick with all the emotions he had bottled up.

"Are you getting a headache, Will?"

He sighed, leaning his head against the back of the plush sofa and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Hannibal inferred a yes from his gesture and disappeared, returning moments later with a tall glass of water and a single white tablet in his hand. Will glanced at the drug suspiciously.

"Tylenol," Hannibal assured him.

Will swallowed the pill and gulped down some water to soothe his throat, all the while Hannibal watched with a discerning eye. "You look dehydrated, Will. You really should take more care of yourself."

Will snorted derisively. He was one to talk; Hannibal has caused more emotional distress to Will than Will could cause himself physical harm. "She's angry with me."

"You shouldn't take it so personally; she's thirteen, anger is the easiest emotion for her to express."

"She should be angry at me. I hurt her."

"You were ill, intellectually she understands that."

"She was bruised for a week afterwards," Will whispered, tormented by the imagined sight of his daughter covered in finger-mark bruises.

"Who told you that?" Hannibal asked sharply.

"Freddie Lounds. She visited me while I was in hospital. Offered to sue Jack for neglecting my mental health as an FBI consultant."

Hannibal's mask flickered; he attempted to contain his emotions. Will wished he didn't try so hard. "And you trust this woman with your plight?"

"Trust is something I don't have to give."

"You used to trust."

"Try being betrayed by your beloved husband and close personal friend, it cures you of that pretty quickly."

"Will, I want you to talk to me. I want to win your trust back."

"I can't… not right now. I have to focus on my relationship with Abigail."

“I think you want to forgive me, forgive us both, but that desire feels like its own betrayal which is why you are fighting so hard against the idea of letting me try to make it up to you.”

“And I think that's what you want to believe. “ Will sighed, every moment spent in his husband's company drained him emotionally and physically. “I have to get going; it's a long drive. Please, kiss Abigail goodnight for me and tell her I'll be back soon.” Will gathered up his coat and headed out, leaving Hannibal to assess the situation. Will was being more stubborn that he had anticipated, perhaps he needed a push from another direction? Something to think on, certainly.

Hannibal was sketching in his study when a small impatient rap disturbed him. The door swung open without waiting for his permission and Abigail strode over to his desk, her arms crossed aggressively and a glare marring her pretty face. Hannibal, not accustomed to rewarding belligerent behaviour, simply continued to shade the image he had formed of his husband’s body sprawled out over a sacrificial alter. Abigail huffed and leaned forwards to see what had captured his attention so entirely, wincing in disgust when she saw her parent depicted naked.

Hannibal sat back; satisfied she had learnt her lesson on the subject of interrupting. “Yes, Abigail?”

“You said you could get him to come home!” She stated accusingly.

Hannibal regarded her calmly. “What has given you the impression that he will not be?”

“He has a house, and dogs…”

Hannibal’s mouth curled, not a grimace or a smile but an expression surely only he was capable of making. Will’s predilection for homing strays had manifested even more strongly now that he was left to his own devices. “All temporary, I assure you.”

“Really? You don’t appear to be making any progress.”

“Come,” Hannibal commanded, drawing her away from the desk and over to the couch which filled the warmest corner of his study. It was here that he liked to lie down with a lengthy novel and two fingers of the finest Scotch on cold winter evenings. He sat there now, drawing Abigail with him and holding her close to his body in a parody of comfort.

“Tell me, why this is it that this is distressing you so, Abigail.”

Abigail sniffed indelicately. “He doesn’t love me anymore.”

“Nonsense; with all that has happened to him, the one thing he is most sure of is his love for you.”

“Doesn’t he love you anymore?”

“I do not believe that is the problem.” He paused, choosing his next words carefully. “I hurt him.”

“Why?” Abigail asked point blank.

Hannibal could have smiled with pride. His daughter was not one to assume that her tevas has made a mistake, so he must have hurt Will on purpose. In a way, Hannibal supposed he had. “I was… upset that your father had chosen to remove himself from my house, and my reach. I wanted him to feel the sting of rejection. It was petty and cruel.”

“I want him to come home, Tėti.”

“I do as well, Abigail.”

“Well, whatever your plan is it’s taking too long. Can I help?”

Hannibal smiled, reaching out to brush a strand of dark brown hair away from her wet cheek. Yes, she was worthy of his pride.

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The air was thick with tension, making breathing seem like an effort and contributing to the headache that Will had woken up with. Across the polished wooden conference table Chilton tapped his fingernails to the tune of Chop Sticks, smug satisfaction radiating from his relaxed posture. Hannibal, of course, was not so crass as to express facially or even gesture his own emotional state. Will wished he could appear as opaque, but he feared there was no hiding the sleepless nights he’d had or the stress he was under. It had been three weeks since the injunction had been granted denying Will access to Abigail. No home visits, phone calls, letters, texts. He was being punished at Hannibal’s whims, and to top it all off, Freddie was late.

“If your lawyer fails to arrive by the time that clock strikes the hour, his meeting is disbanded and Ms Lounds faces a fine for wasting all of our time,” warned the mediator, who had a particular dislike of Freddie Lounds and her taste for the very ugly very public cases.

Will nodded, his eyes unfocused but his mind unable to stray from his one single thought' that he needed Abigail back, and now.

“Will,” Hannibal said loudly, drawing Will’s attention. He realised that his husband must have been trying to get his attention for some time. He blushed. “Will, you look like you could use some water.”

“I’m not a child,” Will snapped, sounding all of twelve. Hannibal sent him a look of disapproval, like they were at one of Hannibal’s infamous dinner parties and Will had said or done something to embarrass him. The sensation of inadequacy washed over Will and he resented it.

“You have a headache, Will, the suggestion that rehydration may elevate the pain is not outrageous.”

Will smiled grimly and lifted the glass of water and took a long provocative gulp of water before quietly setting the half empty container down on the wooden surface in front of him. “Happy?”

“It is only yourself you hurt, Will.”

Will met Hannibal’s eyes, and the rest of the room faded away until their was only Hannibal and that penetrating brown gaze.

“Oh good, you waited for me!” Freddie Lounds crashed into the room like a mini tornado, all crimson curls and sharp white teeth. Her smile was anything but friendly. “Mr Graham, I hope you haven't said anything.”

“Nothing incriminating,” Will assured her dryly, breaking eye contact with Hannibal. His hands twitched where he had them linked in front of him on the table.

“That remains to be seen,” Freddie muttered to him under her breath as she took her seat opposite Chilton. “And how are we today, Frederick?”

“Oh splendid, and you Fredericka?”

“Terrific, but I'll be even better when you rescind the restraining order prohibiting my client from spending any time with or near his adoptive daughter.”

“Fine, as soon as your client submits to a psychological review panel to prove he's stable and that his continued presence in Abigail Lecter's life isn't detrimental to her emotional well-being,” Chilton countered smoothly.

“I believe we first have to prove that Mr Graham's presence in his daughter's life is detrimental before you can have his parental rights revoked. I didn't see any paperwork to that affect?”

Will's eyes flickered up, interested now. “Mr Graham-Lecter's parental rights were suspended after Abigail's behaviour was reported as being anti-social by her Principal. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Bloom, was then asked to conduct an interview with Abigail and concluded that the disruption caused by Mr Graham-Lecter's half-hearted presence in her life was the reason for her outbursts and uncharacteristic behaviour.”

“There is nothing half hearted about my relationship with my daughter,” Will objected angrily. Freddie coughed inelegantly, a signal for him to shut the hell up and let her do the talking.

“You're there one minute, gone the next, you attack her – medical issues aside, that's still a lot for a twelve year old to handle, and now, after almost a year of denying her access to you, you're back wanting to play daddy? What do those actions say to you, Mr Graham-Lecter?”

“Is there a reason you insist on referring to me as Mr Graham-Lecter despite my own lawyer making it abundantly clear that is not my preferred form of address?”

“It might not be preferred, Mr Graham-Lecter, but it is your legal name. Is there a reason you're avoiding the question?”

“I'm waiting for the solution.”

“Excuse me?” Freddie interrupted.

“You are more than excused, Ms Lounds,” Hannibal said, ungraciously. “You are fired.”

“Uh, you can not fire me!”

“No, but I can make it a condition upon Will's access to Abigail.”

“I'm pretty sure it would be illegal to require your ex-spouse to give up the right to a lawyer in order to be granted access to a child he already legally adopted.”

“Will and I legally adopted Abigail together, but since that day six years ago Will has only spent four and a half years residing in the same household as Abigail. As a point of fact, he voluntarily gave up his right as a residential parent, and in the last fourteen months he has seen her only eleven times for a combined length of thirty six hours. He lives alone in a rural farm house far from public transportation in a different state to his daughter's home and school and is currently unemployed. In what realm of reality do you imagine Will winning a custody battle? Also, I might add, Will is still very much my husband. Not at any time before or since his time at the rehabilitation centre has Will attempted to file for a divorce or declare our separation.”

Hannibal's words shut Freddie Lounds up completely.

Chilton, smiling insincerely, added, “my clients conditions are thus; Mr Graham-Lecter drops the case for sole custody, he moves back into the marital home and continues to see a therapist of his own choosing no less than once a fortnight.”

“You have got to be kidding!” Freddie exclaimed, at the precise time that Will said 'fine'. She shot him a look of disgust. “I should have known you didn't have the backbone to follow this through.”

“I should have known you didn't have the balls to back up your claims of being able to do a god damn thing to help me,” Will snapped back at her. “Goodbye, Ms. Lounds, your services, such as they are, will no longer be required.”

Ms Lounds gathered up her red crocodile skin purse and the keys to her convertible. “I'll send you a bill.”

“You know the address; Baltimore, Maryland!” Will called after her as she made a less than dignified exit. He was glad to see the vulture go, but now he was alone and unarmed against Hannibal. “I want something written up promising I won't be evicted and that my rights over Abigail aren't going to be inexplicably and suddenly revoked.”

“We can do that.”

“Your name is already on the property deeds,” Hannibal assured him.

Will blinked. “What?”

“I had the paperwork arranged before our separation. All that is required is a signature.”

“Why always with the mind games, Hannibal?” Will asked, exhausted.

Hannibal smiled, “I wouldn't want you to get bored, dear Will.”

Chapter 3

Part 3.

It was three laborious days before Will finished destroying the shelter he had constructed to hide from Hannibal's influence. He'd brought the dilapidated farmhouse for cheap, with the furniture and fixings included, from an elderly couple who wanted to move down south where the sun didn't abandon them in the winter. He'd done little to the house to make it anything more than convenient, his dogs were his only company and they didn't judge him, but because of this there was a sense of transience echoing through the cluttered rooms. It wasn't home, his house represented his determination to hold on to his own independence. As always, Hannibal had won, but Will resolved to make his husband regret manoeuvring him like this. He wanted Will at home? Fine. Will would reside in Hannibal's ornate walls, but he couldn't force Will to engage in any husbandly activities. They would be like room-mates, but with hallways of hurt and walls of pride between them.

When Will was as finished as he was going to get he made the call that had him truly resenting Hannibal. From memory he dialled a Florida number and waited with moths in his stomach reminding him of how little he'd eaten in the past week. A quarter of whiskey left in a glass decanter called to him but it was still early and Will didn't want to develop bad habits, especially not when he was on the verge of having full access to Abigail. The last thing he needed was someone implying he was a drunk when the truth was he was just a man who had had a few tough weeks and wanted a break. Then Molly picked up the phone and Will felt the ground shift beneath his feet. Molly was another thing he had given up to demonstrate the depth of his commitment to Hannibal.

“I have five minutes then I need to pick Wally up from school,” she said flatly, not bothering with a hello. They both knew he was calling for a favour, not a reunion. Burnt bridges was too tame of an expression to apply to their history, it felt more like the aftermath of a nuclear war. Will could practically taste the singed air.

“I remembered that you loved dogs,” is what he opens with. Neutral grounds, or so he hopes.

Her breath catches. “You loved them more,” it's an accusation where once it had been a praise.

“Yeah, that's how I ended up with six of them.”

“Six?” Impressed or sceptical, Will can no longer tell.

“Strays, in need of a good home.”

“You haven't got a good home, Will?” He could hear how she enjoyed edging that sentence out, like sharpening a knife before attacking.

“My situation is changing. New landlord doesn't like pets.”

“Or maybe he prefers them better trained,” she bit back.

Will felt the rejoinder like a paper-cut. Molly had never hidden her disapproval of Will's relationship with Hannibal, which is one of the reasons they didn't talk any longer. She thought Hannibal brought out the worst in Will and encouraged co-dependency. Will had accused her of being jealous, and that had been the end of their friendship. It had been an unfair comment, cruel and perhaps a little wistful. If Will had ever settled down in any other life it would have been with Molly, but Will had waited too long to ask her out and her current husband had got to her first. If anything Will had been the one with the jealousy issue, and Molly had handled it with more grace and aplomb than Will had any right to ask of such a new friend. That had been a long time ago. Almost two thousand miles and animosity was all that existed between them now.

“I'm doing what's best for my daughter.”

“I'll take the dogs,” Molly said without an air of defeat. “Tell me when to get them.”

“As soon as you can make it to Virginia.”

“I can make it by Thursday. Johnny's got a trunk I can borrow.”

“I'll be waiting. Thank you, Molly.” He was grateful on the dogs behalf, even if a part of him still couldn't let go of all the bad blood between them.

“Take care of yourself, Will, because god knows no one else is going to.”

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Living in Hannibal's brownstone was simultaneously easier and harder than his self-exile had been. He had lost all of the ground that his distance had gained him, but he was closer to Abigail which was almost enough to make it bearable. Hannibal had showed him to the spare room at the end of the corridor away from both Abigail's room on the top floor and the room they had shared as spouses. It was a surreal experience, being treated like a guest in a house he had called home for so many years. The spare room was sparsely furnished but elegant, like every corner of the house, and Will felt entirely more alone in it than he had miles away from Abigail in his rickety farmhouse with only his dogs for company. He felt inexplicably banished. The only benefit was waking up to see Abigail every morning, and kissing her goodnight before every bedtime. Her smile was slowly melting away the bitterness that had been threatening to overwhelm Will, but he wasn't about to say thank you to Hannibal for forcing this situation. At this point he felt like everyone, from Alana to Beverly, Abigail to Bedelia and most certainly Hannibal himself, were just waiting for Will to slip back into the role of dutiful husband. Will resisted all the more strongly because of this.

“Where is Abigail?” Will asked one weekend morning about a month after he had moved back in. He had woken to the scent of fine Italian coffee and thick-cut wood-smoked bacon sizzling on the stove. A quick glance at the antique clock on the wall told him it was still early enough to catch Abigail before she went to school, but he had arrived in the bespoke kitchen to find only Hannibal in his element with an apron protecting today's tailor made suit from flour and egg and fat as he created his breakfast.

“She has gone riding with Miss Verger.”

“Horseback riding?”

“Her birthday wish was to learn, and Miss Verger is an excellent horsewoman.”

“Verger as in of the meat packing dynasty?”

“You sound put out, Will?” Hannibal observed sharply, an edge of something akin to delight buried in his voice. It made Will testy, likely the desired effect. Hannibal loves to prickle the delicately composed.

“I... is there anything else I don't know about Abigail?”

“Many things, probably only a few more than myself. You cannot leave for over a year and then return and expect to pick up where you left as if nothing had changed.”

“Really?” Will snorted indelicately. “I thought that was exactly what you thought would happen.”

“We have all changed, Will, experience and time demand it, to pretend otherwise is foolish.”

Will heaved a sigh that said the words had cut him deeper than possibly intended. He ran a hand over his face, scrubbing away the sleep dust crusted around his eyes, and back through his hair, mussing his appearance. It was a look that Will knew Hannibal found both entirely unacceptable and extremely sexy. Not that he was trying to seduce Hannibal, or remind him of other occasions in which this particular brand of untidy had been caused by passionate hands and impatient limbs wrapped so tightly around each other that separation had seemed impossible. It was the intimacy of living in the same house. Will was a ghost husband, all around him there were echoes of the love he had felt for Hannibal.

“Calling me a fool before eight am? I think that's my cue to leave before things get... ugly,” he turned to leave, wanting to step away from the phantom lovemaking his mind had conjured more than the argument brewing.

“Wait, please.”

So polite, Will found it hard not to immediately acquiesce to anything Hannibal tacked a 'please' onto. His husband had always been formally polite, manners and etiquette were at the forefront of every conversation and action. It was as charming as it was frigid. The dinner parties that Will had been subjected to were a prime example of his husband's perfectionist as a host, and of Will's own failures to meet Hannibal's high standards. Still, rarely did Hannibal utter the word 'please'. It was unnecessary when one was as over-polite as Hannibal, so it had maximum impact when used on Will.

“Can we not sit down and share a meal, as civilised people sharing a household?”

Will's lip curled. “You don't make me feel civilised.”

Will had been avoiding meal times like the plague. A hungry child brought up in poverty and uncertainly, he was used to going without regular or large meals, but it was starting to affect his weight and already Dr du Maurrier had commented on the hallowing of his cheeks. Will was eating, just not well and not substantially. Meal times in the Lecter household had been a family event, even when they had a house full of guests. Always with Hannibal as the chef and the head of the family. He would create a masterpiece for them to ingest and during a conversation would naturally flow, directed of course by Hannibal. It was a wonderful metaphor for their marriage all in a one hour long period and Will couldn't face slipping back into that habit. Having sex with Hannibal would be less intimate than sharing a meal with him. Unfortunately food was something the human body required more than almost anything else, and Will already knew he was fighting a losing battle. It did not mean, however, that he had to give in gracefully. Hannibal had already won so much from him, and Will was loath to give ground on the issue.

“It is your intention to have me appear as though I am starving you?” Hannibal asked, point blank.

“No one would ever believe that of you, Hannibal.”

“You do not enjoy fine cooking?”

“I do not enjoy your company, a fact you seem intent on glossing over.”

“Because, dear Will, it is not true. You need to let go of this anger you are harbouring towards me. It is unhealthy to hold on to the past when the present is a much nicer place to live.”

“You think it is nice for me to be forced to give up my independence, again, and live as a guest in a house that I once called home, with a man I once loved? No, nice is not a word for this situation. Abigail makes this tolerable, and for her sake alone I am trying but-”

“But...? But I am making it hard? Will, I have done nothing to you that would not be considered courteous. I am simply trying to live as best I can in a set of circumstances that are less than desirable.”

“Less than desirable? You're the one who dragged me back here, proverbially kicking and screaming. You knew this isn't what I wanted. I wasted thousands on a lawyer to avoid this outcome but like always you got what you wanted. You're not happy? Then good. Your happiness seized to be my priority when you fucked Alana Bloom in our bed.”

Hannibal's gaze flickered, concealing emotion. Always hiding what he truly felt behind his own impassive mask. It made arguing with him almost impossible, and it made Will feel crazy to even try.

“I want what is best for you.”

Will scoffed loudly and unapologetically. “And you are what's best for me?”

“I am your family, Will.”

“Abigail is my family. I used to think you were my family until I began to see things clearly.”

“You believe I clouded your vision?”

“You veiled it. I saw everything through a gauze of your specific brand of logic and sense. I haven't had a selfish thought since we met, and I'm only aware of it now.”

“You are a husband and a father, Will. The time for selfish thoughts has passed you by. Your responsibility is to your family.”

“Clearly I agree or I wouldn't be here, but that's the problem. I agreed because you created a situation in which I could not be a good father unless I met your conditions. If you really loved me, actual love and not whatever emotion you attribute to the word, then you would have let me have my space and freedom with Abigail and maybe one day I would have found it in me to forgive your sin and start healing. That was the only chance you had to win me back, Hannibal, and you threw it away in exchange for a more immediate sense of control over me.”

“It is very interesting to hear your interpretations of my actions,” Hannibal replied smoothly, dishing up two china white plates of breakfast. “Have you spoken to Bedelia about these conclusions you are drawing? If not, then I believe you should make it the topic of your next session. She will certainly have a lot to work with.”

Will wanted to laugh but with hysteria rather than humour. Hannibal was, in his fancy polite and unobtrusive way, calling him paranoid. “You want to feed me? Fine, I'll accept the food, but I won't be eating it with you. Your presence makes the meal unpalatable.”

Hannibal's expression was bland, but the tightening of his lips and the flare of his nostrils gave away his anger. Will could insult Hannibal's motives and actions but not his food. Calling him an unsatisfying lover would have been less of a blow. Will almost felt guilty, then he remembered the scent of Alana's perfume on his pillow and the sharp glint of her necklace nestled suspiciously in the fabric folds of Hannibal's unmade bed. Righteous with anger once again, he took the plated English breakfast and one pair of the cutlery that Hannibal had arrogantly laid out before disappearing up into his room. The food was delicious, and so was his small but concrete victory.

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Will was hiding in the guest room with his laptop open on job searches and various newspapers scattered around him. He was trying his best to ignore the front cover violence and focus on gaining employment somewhere his mind wouldn't be sacrificed for other people's greater good. Will had thought it odd that Hannibal had not included a stipulation preventing him from seeking work with the FBI in his conditions for Will's reinstatement as a parent of equal rights, but perhaps Hannibal had simply known what Will was realising now. That Will couldn't be as selfish to put other peoples needs above Abigail's. He had hurt her and that was something he knew with utter certainty he never would have done if his mind

had not been filled with someone else's thoughts, even on fire with inflammation that it had been.

His cell beeped at him impatiently and Will realised he'd missed a call. The number wasn't saved under any name but Will would recognise it anywhere. Immediately panic filled him. Molly wouldn't contact him unless it was the very worst news.

“Molly Walker,” she answered. Her voice was tired, I've-been-up-for-two-days-with-no-sleep tired, the way she'd sounded after child birth but without any elation of achievement.

“What's wrong, Molly?”

“Will,” at once relieved and guilt stricken. Will's dread increased ten fold. “I didn't want to... bother you. The dogs are find, mostly. It's just Winston...”

“Did he run away?”

“Several times, but he never got very far. He's been pining for you. The rest of the dogs have settled in fine. A few of them we gave to other families, good homes, but we kept Buster, Randy and Spot. Winston kept running away from the new family and coming to find the other dogs with us so we just took him back thinking it's be okay, that he just needed his pack around him.”

“Is he okay?”

“The vet we took him too said he's lost too much weight and if this continues he'll end up starving himself. I'm sorry, Will, I didn't know what else to do.”

Will couldn't ever stand to hear a woman cry. “I'll come get him.”

“I can meet you half way,” Molly offered, gratitude evident. “I can meet you in St. George just off of the I-95? My grandmother still lives there.”

“I'll start driving now.”

Will hung up the phone and abandoned his research. He tossed a spare set of clothes into a duffel and searched through his dirty laundry for the pyjamas he'd worn last night, now reeking of sweat after his nightmares. He included a book, frayed pages and a broken spine, and finally popped in a a few dog treats he'd forgotten he'd had. He considered leaving a note but figured he could just call from the road. He didn't owe Hannibal any explanation as to how he spent his time, and Abigail was out at a riding lesson due to return at an unknown hour by unknown means.

Or so he had thought until the sound of a tea cup shattered his belief. “You're leaving?” The words bled from Abigail's throat.

“No,” Will assured her, dropping the bag and coming to her side, kneeling in the shards of china as he brought his hands up to cup her face. He was shorter than her like this, and it felt like he was praying to her for forgiveness. “I'm never leaving you again,” he swore.

Confusion replaced the pure agony on her face and she trembled in his fragile hold. “I don't... why are you carrying a bag then?”

“I have to go somewhere, a road trip. It;s just for a few hours and then I'll be home.”

“Where are you going?”

“It's a surprise.”

“Not good enough,” she shook her head. “How do I know you'll come back?”

“I promised, didn't I?”

She stepped back, creating a space between us into which she threw her pain. “You also promised never to hurt me. I need more.”

Will flinched as if she had slapped him, the blow felt deeper than any cut could ever go. “All my stuff is in my room, Abigail.”

“You don't need things,” she scoffed. “You aren't materialistic. Living with Tėti... it's not that bad is it?”

Will bridged the gap between them, his thumb stroking away moisture on her cheek. “No, baby, it's not that bad. Nothing that brings me closer to you could ever be that bad.”

“So you won't leave?”

“I... I have to go on my road trip, but it'll only be a few hours. You... you could come with me if you wanted?”

“Really?” Her face brightened. “Won't Tėti be mad at us?”

“I can handle your father, Abigail. All you need is a coat. What do you say?”

Her smile answered for her.

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Will waited until they were on a straight stretch of road before thumbing his cell to call Hannibal. Abigail looked scandalised, her precious Tėti would never use the phone while driving, after all it was against the law. She deftly stole the phone from Will's distracted grasp and took on the chore of informing her father that she was not where she was meant to be. He was as quiet as the eye of a storm and Abigail knew that they were both in trouble when they got back home. Her Tėti did not believe in yelling down phone lines, but he ended the call with a promise that they would talk about this when they got back to Maryland. Abigail was still in the dark about what goal her dad hoped to accomplish with this journey, it seemed he wanted to talk to her about everything except their destination and Abigail allowed him this indulgence knowing that eventually her curiosity would be satisfied. It was pleasant to be sat beside her dad and listen to the timbre of his voice, hear the subtle New Orleans twist to his accent and bathe in the sweet honey of his words. Both Will and Hannibal were well spoken,

especially in comparison to Abigail's biological parents who were happier with colloquialisms over technicalities or poetry, but where as Hannibal sounded well educated, Will sounded well read, as if even in-spite of his own college education all his knowledge and wisdom had been found between the pages of a book and it made for a lullaby of sounds. Abigail was almost sorry when they pulled up outside of an animal hospital.

“Daddy, who is that?” Abigail asked uneasily as Molly rose from the veterinary waiting room chair and paced anxiously towards them.

“An old friend,” he said briefly, keeping her hand enclosed in his as he met the harried woman half way. “How is he?”

“The doctor is worried. Wants to see you before he'll release Winston.”

“Winston? You had a dog called Winston,” Abigail blurted out, wishing to be drawn into the conversation. It was rude of her dad not to introduce them, but he was obviously in distress so Abigail was able to forgive him, but it didn't mean she was going to forgive the pretty woman the same sin.

“You must be Abigail,” the woman said, not answering her question. “I'm Molly. I used to know your dad before he met... your other dad. I've been looking after his dogs for him, but one of them is sick. Do you like dogs, Abby?”

“It's just Abigail,” she insisted.

“Manners,” Will chided her, and she wanted to roll her eyes at the hypocrisy, but then she'd be just as guilty and she preferred to have the higher ground.

“Sorry. I don't know if I like dogs, I've never had one before.”

“Looks like that is about to change,” Molly smiled.

“Let's go on in and you can meet him.”

They left Molly in the waiting room, instantly smoothing Abigail's frayed nerves. The veterinarian they met had dark skin and keen eyes, watching with sharp critique as her dad greeted the animal. Will was enthusiastic, warm and firm. He forced the dog to calm down with just the cadence of his voice and rewarded the pet by offering him a treat which the dog snapped up between powerful teeth. They embraced, or at least the animal seemed to bury its head in the nook of Will's neck and Will's hands started to comb the dog's clean and thick fur with a comforting rhythm. Abigail was almost jealous at the depth of bond demonstrated, that was until her dad introduced her to Winston and she was greeted with almost as much exuberance. It helped, she guessed, that she smelled like Will but even when the dog was close enough to be able to differentiate between the surface smell of Will and Abigail's own unique scent, it still remained in her arms panting warmly against her body. She had never felt so rewarded. The sound of Will discussing weight and food and exercise was drowned out by the gentleness in Winston's eyes. Abigail hardly even realised when the doctor left, only when Will's hands gently clipped a lead onto the collar around Winston's neck was she full aware of her surroundings.

“He likes you.”

Abigail blushed. “I like him. Do you think Tėti will let him live with us?”

“I think Tėti is going to have to.”

Abigail linked her arm though Will's and leaned against him as they left the animal hospital. It was several hours until they reached home, and Winston lay across the back seat with Will's pyjamas underneath him as he whimpered his way to sleep. By the time they arrived at the Lecter house it was past Abigail's bedtime. After her father ascertained if she had eaten he sent her upstairs to her room to sleep. She disobeyed, moving away from the door only enough so that she wouldn't be seen as she eavesdropped.

“Well? Have you anything to say for yourself?” Hannibal started, his voice tight with worry. Abigail had only heard it sound so strained once before in her life, when she had been in the hospital following Will's uncharacteristic roughness. Her first question had been to ask where daddy was, and Hannibal had endured the chore of informing her of Will's illness. Abigail didn't like to think of her life as it was during that period.

“I don't answer to you.”

“You do when it comes to Abigail's safety.”

“She was safe. She was with me the entire time.”

“I'm not going to remind you of the dubiousness of that assertion.” Abigail fought down a wave of nausea, her back ached as if Will was still holding her against the wall as he spewed venom aimed at an anonymous murder victim, a hate letter written on the inside of Will's skull from a psychopath to a prostitute.

“That's unfair,” Will whispered as if he didn't believe the words himself. “I was sick. I would never hurt Abigail deliberately.”

Abigail imaged the expression on Hannibal's face, the twitch of his thin lips pressed together in an attempt to control his own temper. “I apologise,” he said after a silent battle. “I was worried. My daughter was gone and I had no idea where she saw. Abigail's call was...vague.”

Will sighed. “It's my own fault. I was acting on instinct rather than logic, I know that's not an excuse in your book but it's all I have to offer you.”

“May I ask where your impromptu excursion took you to?”

“South Carolina. You know I had dogs, when I lived at Wolf Trap? Well, Molly took them off of my hands when I moved back in here and she called me because one of the dogs, Winston, was sick. He's been pining for me.”

“You brought him back?”

Will frowned. “How did you know?”

“There is animal hair on your shirt and Abigail smelt of dog. If you had not intended to bring him back you would not have introduced her to him.” Abigail thought she understood now, why Will had not introduced her to Molly but had taken the time to do so when it came to Winston. To Will it was not important that she meet Molly, she was just another face in the crowd who Abigail would never see again. Her life had no impact on Abigail's. Winston, however, was family and Will had wanted her to know him.

“He's my condition. I won't leave him again, so if I'm to live here then he will be as well,” Will insisted.

“It's too late for conditions, Will. I know you would never leave this house willinging when it would mean leaving Abigail, so your threat is moot. It is also,” Hannibal continued, cutting off whatever angry retort Will was about to loose on him. “Unnecessary.”

“You would let me have a dog?”

“I would not deprive an animal of its health, or you of something so important to you.”

“There is a catch?”

“I think you should look at this situation as a paradigm of your own.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your pet is pining, yes? Experiencing side effects such as loss of appetite and thus weight loss?” The words were pointed.

“I'm not a dog,” Will bit out.

“You are not pining, either. You are just being stubborn. You should not cut your nose off to spite your face, Will, especially when it is such a beautiful face.”

Will's breath caught audibly at the compliment. Abigail remembered that her dad never could accept praise of any kind, always blushing or stuttering out a denial. Tėti always said it was because Will had grown up poor in love as well as money. “The point is?”

“You will join Abigail and myself for mealtimes, and your dog will be welcomed into the family.”

“Fine,” Will gritted the words between his teeth. “Is that all?”

“For now,” Hannibal said, sounding smug.

Will's shoe steps echoed on the hardwood floor of the foyer until he almost reached the door, stopped only by Hannibal's voice ringing out, “and Will?”

Will stopped on a sigh.

“One more thing before you retire. If you ever take my daughter over the state line without my explicit consent ever again, I will have you drawn up on kidnapping charges so fast your

head will feel like encephalitis was just a cold, and you will never see Abigail again. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Will whispered, shamed.

“Goodnight, then, sweet William. Don't let the nightmares bite.”

Hannibal leaned in and kissed the base of Will's neck before sliding past him and existing the room first. His eyes found Abigail's from where she was sitting on the staircase. He had known she was there all along. The warning, she believed, was for both herself and Will, but it was also a promise and Abigail was as comforted as she was cowed. She kissed her Tėti goodnight on his age worn cheek and finally obeyed his initial command to go to bed. She slept easily, not even stirring when Will shrieked pained sounds out in his sleep.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> So my apologies because it's been a while since I updated. I struggled to get this chapter out, but am pleased to say I got where I needed to be even if it's not as well written as I wanted it to be. It could be because this chapter deals with the Matthew part of the plot, he is a necessary evil guys! We aren't here to cheer them on, this is a Hannigram end game remember! Still, one (maybe two???) more parts left and then it will be at an end!

Will fidgeted in the plush leather chair that served as Bedelia's psychiatric couch. After moments of micro movements that squeaked and purred the doctor broke the silence.

"Comfortable?" Bedelia asked, no inflection in her tone.

"Depends."

"On?"

"If you talking about me sat in this chair or me in my current life situation."

"We can talk about either, it's your hour."

"But I'm guessing me complementing the chair wouldn't be particularly beneficial to my mental health."

"So it's your home life that is uncomfortable?" Bedelia concluded.

Will's mouth twisted into a grimace. "It could never have been anything else."

"Even before your separation with your husband you suffered with a sense of uncomfortableness in your marital home."

"It wasn't my home, it was where I lived with Hannibal and then Abigail as well."

"Have you thought of addressing this with Hannibal? You agreed to move back in but it doesn't need to feel like a prison."

"Home is less about material items for me. It's a feeling that can't be replicated by buying things or decorating."

"When was the last time you felt like you had a home, Will?"

Will opened his mouth to answer, but there was none. His childhood was an amalgamation of temporary roofs over his head and his adulthood had not strayed from that pattern.

“Or,” Bedelia interjected when no reply came forth. “Is it that the question should be: What does home mean to you?”

“I want to say Abigail but I feel like that wouldn’t be the whole truth. I love her, she’s my world, and living with her has changed my life for the better even if it does mean having to live with Hannibal too. I guess I don’t know what home is to me, although it’s certainly been nice to have Winston with me.”

“Your dog, yes?”

Will paused. He had not mentioned Winston to Bedelia in any context previously. It confirmed his suspicions that his psychiatrist and his husband were discussing him outside of their sessions. Will could only hope that Bedelia’s professionalism prevented her from getting into any detail regarding his feelings towards Hannibal. “Yes. I still feel like a guest in Hannibal’s house but when I’m with Winston in the garden it feels a little more like a home to me.”

“Is there a reason you never pursued a pet before?”

“You have met Hannibal,” Will said dryly, and was rewarded by the slight spasm of the corner of her mouth that spoke of a suppressed smile. It was, at least, a genuine human emotion, something of which Will had been starting to believe Bedelia incapable of.

“I am aware that he does not do dog hair on his antique furniture and that the smell offends his heightened olfactory sense. Do you want to discuss how you came to have Winston in your life?”

“I made a deal with the devil.”

“What did you bargain away?”

“No jokes about it being my soul?” Will said lightly as he ignored the twist in his gut.

“I assumed Hannibal would want something more tangible.”

Something he didn’t already possess, Will thought to himself. “I agreed to have family dinners with them.”

“That is something you felt the need to protect yourself from?”

“Everyone in my life act and talks like they are all just waiting for me to fall back into my old life. Even Hannibal, for all his talk about how we have all changed. Sometimes even I feel like I’m waiting for it, but then I remember how the bile rose in my throat at the sight of Alana’s necklace in our bed and the fight seems necessary.”

“You will never move past your husband’s infidelity unless you want to,” the words sounded like a warning coming from Bedelia’s bland face.

“Then perhaps it’s time for everyone to consider that I don’t want to get over being betrayed.”

The good knives were out when Will got home from therapy. That wasn’t to imply that Hannibal owned any substandard implements, only that there were some that were of a high quality and others that would make a professional chef weep to hold. Will had once asked Hannibal why he had never pursued a position as a chef. His husband’s reply, that cookery was what he did to relax and if he chose to have a career in catering then the soothing sensation he got from cooking would leave, had surprised him, not because of its practicality but because it showed a softer side to Hannibal that Will sometimes forgot he possessed. Tonight Hannibal looked in his element, with bloodied knives and dishes of exotic vegetation laid out around him.

“Dr du Maurier asked me to pass on her acceptance to tomorrow’s feast,” Will said as he lingered awkwardly in the doorway.

Hannibal inclined his head. “I had hoped she would be able to attend, despite the short notice. There were a few people who had made other arrangements and could not make it.”

Will cleared his throat nervously. “I… uh… I will be one of them, I am afraid.”

Hannibal stopped cutting the pig’s lung in front of him and placed the knife to the side before looking up and attempting to meet Will’s eyes. Will stared at the lung. “Is there a reason for your defection, or are you simply uncomfortable with the idea of dining with our friends considering the awkwardness between us?”

“Both,” Will choked on a bitter laugh. “I don’t see that it matters anyway. You have always been embarrassed by me at your social functions.”

“You are my husband, Will, and I have only ever been proud to have you at my side. Any embarrassment you felt was your own,” Hannibal assured him in a tone that left no room for argument.

“If that’s how you really feel then I will ensure I am free next time you host a dinner party. Tomorrow night, however, I am meeting Beverly for bad Chinese food and mediocre beer,” Will added with a brief smile, as if to soften the blow of being turned down for what Hannibal would consider a nightmarish combination.

“Beverly is very important to you, she should be important to us as well. You could invite her, there is always enough food,” Hannibal suggested with a hint of steal behind his words.

Will felt the urge to apologise, instead he forced himself to step back as if physical distance would ease the sensation of being tangled up in Hannibal's web once more. Will was aware that freedom of movement did not necessarily mirror freedom of thought, and it was losing his sense of self that he feared the most.

“Next time,” he said evenly, but it took more effort than he would admit to.

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed amicably. He left the island and brushed past Will to reach for a bulb of garlic that hung behind him. His left hand moved to cup Will's opposite elbow as if to steady himself although it served the dual purpose of imprisoning Will until Hannibal had freed the bulb and retreated. These touches, intimate yet mundane, were becoming more frequent. The kiss on the back of his neck, a hand across his lower back as they moved across the room, a caress of his cheek... Hannibal acted like they were husbands and Will's body seemed to agree. Tomorrow was... necessary. Some space from the claustrophobia of his suspended marriage would give him enough perspective to see through the touches analytically instead of reacting to them as if he was starved of touch.

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Beverly listened to him without interruption and slurped away at her Chinese food inelegantly. Eventually, between mouthfuls of greasy noodles, she said; “it seems to me that if you could get over the fact that Hannibal slept with someone else your life would be cherry.”

“If only,” Will drawled. Beverly was beyond oversimplifying the issues that had rocked the foundation of his marriage. Hannibal's act of adultery was only one small element of the problems between them, but a stellar example of why Will's heart hurt so much. “Got any suggestions?”

“Me? No, but you could always follow my sister's advice.”

“Michelle? And what did the bratiest Katz have to say on the subject.”

“Nothing insightful, that's for sure. When she was younger her boyfriend cheated on her. She was pretty devastated, but in typical Brat style she was more upset that people knew he'd cheated than the fact he betrayed her,” Bev rolled her eyes. “Anyway, she decided the only way to get over being mad about what he did was to get even. So, she waited until he found himself a new girlfriend then seduced her and arranged to have him find them together.

“If you can't stay mad, get even?”

“It's a stupid idea, Will. You know it's stupid because Shelley thought of it,” Bev said, her voice flat now that she was starting to realise Will hadn't taken it for the joke she had meant it to be.

“Did it work?”

“Did she stop being mad at him? Yeah, but it didn't end there. He got his own revenge by keying her BMW. It might sound tame in comparison but he knew my dad paid for the car and the insurance. He went ballistic. I have never seen him so angry, especially not at Shelley. He grounded her for three months, took her car away and stopped her allowance. He even forbid her from dating until she was twenty-one.”

“Not that it stopped her,” Will said wryly.

“No, not that it stopped her. I'm just saying, actions have consequences, Will, and there is a difference between revenge and justice. You have too much to lose.”

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Revenge. The thought stayed with him even as he navigated the inevitable intimacy of living with his husband once more. Will had to admit to himself that touch starved was not a misnomer. At the rehabilitation centre there was only the carefully clinical touch of the nurse once a day to hand over his pot of pills, and Abigail's hugs, no matter how heart-warming, were no replacement for adult encounters.

However when he looked at his life he could see no options for company. How did people meet lovers? Will had met Hannibal through work, but he was now unemployed and it seemed inadvisable to experiment without changing the variables considering the outcome of their union. Not exactly regrettable despite the pain it caused them both, but it wouldn't be sane of him to repeat it. Jack had met his Bella travelling, fellow Americans in a foreign city carried away by too much wine and the headiest drug of all; youth. Will was sure he had never felt so immortal as a young man and if he hadn't at twenty he certainly didn't now with a body of battle scars and the occasional grey hair in his beard. Besides, he could never leave Abigail so travel was not an option he had any intention to pursue. He and Molly had been introduced by a friend, but Will was running short on them and despite the anecdote he knew that Beverly was rooting for a reunion between Hannibal and himself making it unlikely she would introduce him to any suitable partners. Beverly herself had met her latest boyfriend on the internet, however it left Will cold at the idea of describing himself as a piece of meat on the internet for all to see and judge.

In the end his inaction was rewarded. Winston was the force that ended up bringing fruition to Will's darkest desire.

It was a Sunday morning when Will was woken by a sobbing Abigail throwing his door open and choking out the words that had Will reaching for his shirt in seconds.

“I promise I didn't do anything!” Abigail swore, her cheeks flushed with emotion.

Will paused the task of dressing and sat down next to his daughter, cradling her close to his sleep warmed body. “Why would you say that? Of course you didn't. He was sick when we picked him up from Molly. I expected him to start getting better once we were home but if he'd throwing up then I need to get him to a vets to check there isn't anything else wrong with him.”

She looked at his eyes as if searching his soul. She must have eventually decided he was telling her the truth because she nodded and wiped at her cheeks with the backs of her hands, sniffing indelicately. Will smiled and handed her some tissue, waiting patiently for her to blow her nose. When she finally spoke she surprised him.

“You called this home.”

“Abigail,” he began, his heart aching for her. “You are my home. I'm never going to do anything to make you doubt that ever again,” he promised, kissing her on the forehead.

“Can I come with you to the veterinarian?”

“Let me finished getting dressed and we'll see what your Tevas has to say about that.”

Abigail waited outside as Will changed his underwear and pulled on a pair of beige slacks and grabbed his phone. Downstairs his friend lay on the floor taking shallow breaths near a puddle of vomit. Will dropped to the floor near the dog and stroked Winston's head, he whined a shallow and high pitched noise that hurt Will's heart to hear.

“Abigail, get a cloth and a bowl of water and then if you would wake your father I would really appreciate that,” Will said, a small smile for his daughter even as concern wrinkled around his eyes.

Abigail nodded and rushed off to do as she had been bid. If Hannibal was awake she'd no doubt be scolded for running through the house but Will understood the urgency of the situation and it meant a lot to him that Abigail was breaking the rules she lived her life by to help Winston. He guessed she really was his daughter as well as Hannibal's.

“Thank you,” Will took the items off of her and she lingered to see what he would do. Will presented the dish of water to Winston to see if he was capable of drinking by himself, but when he didn't lift his head Will took matters into his own hands. He soaked the cloth and rung it out so the water fell into Winston's mouth. Some was swallowed but most of it trickled out the sides of his mouth. Will's worry grew.

“I'll wake Teti,” Abigail assured him, running up the stair case in her bare feet.

Will crooned over Winston while she was gone, rubbing his hands over every inch of available fur to feel for lumps or distension or wounds. There was nothing obvious but Winston retched a few times while they waited. When Abigail arrived again she was dressed in a pair of smart blue jeans, a sweater and a coat with thick boots and a small bag with her. Hannibal, appeared behind her dressed in a beautiful bathrobe that Will knew to be soft and warm and no matter how often it was washed it always smelled like Hannibal. He watched as Abigail rushed to Will's side and pressed a kiss into Winston's fur.

“You will be sure to call me with the results of his tests.”

“Of course,” Will said uncertainly.

“And if it is a disease that can be transmitted to humans you will take yourself and our daughter to the nearest hospital and seek treatment immediately,” Hannibal added, sounding more like himself.

“I would never put Abigail at risk,” Will assured him.

“Which is why I asked that you make sure you as well seek treatment. I know how neglectful you can be when it comes to your own health.”

Will winced but nodded. He scooped Winston up and headed to the door, Abigail trailing behind him with his car keys in her hand. Will hesitated before exiting and turned around,

“thank you,” he said, and Hannibal inclined his head.

The drive was short to the nearest veterinarians and Will was forced to admit it was much more convenient to live in Hannibal's Baltimore brownstone than his ramshackle house in Wolf Trap which was miles away from anything resembling help. Abigail was a blessing, soothing his frayed nerves as they waited to be seen by the on-call veterinarian, and fetching him substandard coffee from a machine in the waiting room. Eventually a lean man in his thirties with sharp intelligent green eyes that seemed at odds with his placid calming expression.

“I'm Dr Brown,” he introduced without bothering to shake anyone's hand. A rudeness that Hannibal would surely have condemned him for, but Will found it comforting that the vet immediately knelt down to greet Winston. He kept his tone low and reassuring as he did a quick visual examination right there in the waiting room.

“Vomiting, right?”

“Abigail was with him.”

“I couldn't sleep. Neither could he,” she whispered, leaning into Will's side. “Is he going to be okay?”

Dr Brown smiled up at her. “I'm going to take him into the examination room and give him a thorough check over. His breathing seems to be okay, and that's the most important thing. Can you tell me if there has been any abnormal stool?”

“We walked him yesterday and everything seemed to be in working order,” Will said, remembering vividly the expression on Abigail's face when Will asked er if she was ready to pick the deposit up with a baggy after Winston pooped all over their neighbours front drive.

“Okay, that's good. Can you carry him for me?”

“You look strong enough,” Will said as he lifted Winston and followed the young vet. He winced when he realised how awkward his words sounded. Socialisation didn't come easy to Will, he was neither a natural at it nor practised in it and most days that was by choice. However what he said sounded like a poorly worded come on, or perhaps an insult. Even Abigail, more than accustomed to her adoptive father's blunders, gave him a curious expression. “Sorry, I didn't mean that how it sounded.”

“Well, I'm not sure if I should be offended by that or not. I guess it depends on how you think it sounded,” Dr Brown said, and Will thought he caught the man checking his left hand for what Will presumed was a ring. It was presumptuous, and Will flushed slightly. He guessed he had been flirting and that made him feel a thousand times more awkward. This wasn't exactly the ideal time to try and pick up men, with Winston's health in jeopardy, his daughter by his side and wearing the same sweat stained t-shirt he'd slept in.

Abigail glanced at his hand, his right hand, where the skin paled in a perfect ring around his third finger. This was the hand that had signified his marriage to Hannibal. The ceremony had been decidedly modern and efficient although that wasn't to say it had lacked in

extravagance, with their tuxedos costing more than Will made in a year as a cop and the attention to detail being almost obsessive. Hannibal had wanted one thing from his heritage to survive, and he had insisted that they wore their wedding rings on their right hands as was the tradition in Lithuania. Will had joked about other people not being able to tell if he was married or not and hitting on him, Hannibal had smiled and declared that he wasn't worried because he knew Will loved him. Will found the it painfully ironic that the person Hannibal cheated with hadn't needed to check his finger for a ring, she'd been at the wedding.

“I should call home. Daddy's probably waiting for us to give him an update.”

Will glanced at her sharply. He guessed he wasn't the only one who thought his comment had been flirtatious. Abigail never called Hannibal 'daddy', preferring the Lithuanian term of 'teti', and she must know her father's indifference to Winston's existence. “Abigail, I'm sure he's gone back to sleep by now.”

“He wouldn't. He's probably up waiting for us to call him.”

Will sighed as he lay Winston down on the table, stroking the pained dog's matted fur as he backed away. “We don't have any news yet.”

“He'll want to hear from us,” she insisted.

“It might be best if she's out of the room for this part. You however, I need. I didn't ask you to carry him out of concern for my back, I need you to keep him calm,” Dr Brown interrupted, his tone professional to a fault.

Will rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Fine, you call him in the waiting room and I'll be out as soon as I can. But don't wonder, stay where the receptionist can see you!”

Abigail rolled her eyes. “I need your phone. I left mine at home. He's speed dial one, right?”

“No, you are,” Will corrected her, and earned a genuine smile from his tempestuous teenage daughter. “He's number three.”

Her smile fell. “Who's number two?”

Will ignored the fact that Dr Brown was clearly listening to their conversation, even as he started his preliminary check of Winston. “Bedelia.” When he had gotten his new phone, one that Jack didn't have the number of, or at least he hadn't been given, he'd programmed it so that Dr du Maurier's number would always appear before Hannibal's to remind him what his relationship with Hannibal had come to; court appointed visits, sectioned in a mental hospital and Alana... it always came back to Alana.
Abigail frowned but she took the cell and stepped outside the door but stayed in his eye line. He breathed easier knowing he could see her.

“Well, I think I know what the problem is but I want to get him in for a quick x-ray just to be sure.”

“That was quick.”

“I'm good at my job, as well as strong,” Dr Brown smiled, friendlier now that Abigail was out of earshot.

Will looked away and took a breath to prevent himself from stuttering. “I didn't mean it to sound...”

“Flirtatious?”

“Like an insult.”

“So you were flirting.”

“It was inappropriate. I apologise.”

“Don't. Unless your husband is who you're apologising to?”

Will felt insane, having this conversation in a vet's office at two am in the morning while his daughter phoned his husband and his dog panted beside him. Of course, he knew what real insanity felt like so he knew this was actually happening. “We're... he's not a factor.”

“Good. Can you hold him still while I get this shot?” Dr Brown asked, manoeuvring a portable x-ray machine into position.

“Sure,” Will said, steadier now that the focus was on Winston again. “Are you thinking he swallowed a bone?”

Dr Brown looked at him with startled appreciation. “Yes. He doesn't seem to be suffering with anything else. A little underweight but you said the vomiting only started last night.”

“He was pining. I gave him to a friend but when he started to sicken he came home with me. He's been putting the weight back on at a good rate, it's just that he was a stray before hand and he's not exactly a puppy any more.”

“You brought him from a shelter?”

“No. Found him on the side of the road. No chip. Just a rope around his neck like someone had tied him up and left him. Gave him a bath and some food. Only planned on keeping him until he was fit enough to be adopted. I always plan for that... only it never seems to happen.”

Dr Brown laughed, a warm sound that made Will's stomach churn. “So you have more?”

Will shook his head regretfully. “It's just me and him left.”

“And your daughter... and your husband.”

“It's complicated,” Will said, trying not to sound as if he was apologising. From the easy smile on Dr Brown's face he figured he had failed.

“I can do complicated.”

“So, uh, Winston...”

Dr Brown's smile grew. He turned around to fetch the x-ray and slipped the sheet up on the screen. “There,” he pointed. “I can see some bone lodged at the back of his throat which would have caused him to retch. I'll sedate him and dislodge it so it doesn't cause any more problems. You can wait with your daughter for this part.”

Will nodded, giving Winston a firm pat down and letting him lick at his face before joining Abigail. She was still on the cell, so he relayed the information to her. She held the phone out to him but he shook his head and she pouted even as she told Hannibal what was going on. After a few minutes she disconnected the call and returned the cell phone. Will slipped it into his trouser pocket and sat down with her on a pair of well worn plastic chairs.

“Dad,” she began, biting her lip. “I thought... when you moved back home, I thought...”

“You thought I would be coming back as your tevas' husband as well as your dad. You thought we'd be a family again, like before.”

She nodded, pulling the sleeves of her sweater over her hands.

“What did your tevas say, about why we don't share a bedroom anymore? About why I didn't come and live with you after I was released.”

“He said he hurt you. That it was... petty and cruel.”

“Did he say why he did it?” Will asked, his heart felt like every beat pushed the blood out of him, like he was haemorrhaging.

“He said... he saidthat he wanted you to feel rejected, because it felt like you had rejected him when you moved out.”

“His god damn pride,” Will hissed.

Abigail's eyes widened. “Please don't tell him I said anything!”

“Oh no, Abigail don't worry about that. I wouldn't betray your confidence like that. I just needed to know what he'd said.”

“So you could figure out how much you can tell me?”

“I don't want to hurt you unnecessarily.”

“Was it because of me?”

“No. No. I never want you to think that, ever again. You are the only reason I am whole right now. You are what I came back for. I will never be able to forgive myself for hurting you.”

“I do. I forgive you,” she said, and slipped a hand inside of his. His breathing evened out and his heart stopped hurting. Abigail was the answer to all his prayers, and the reason for them. He knew that what he had done was permanent like a scar, the damage it caused could never

be forgotten, but her forgiveness was a bandage to his own bruises and scars. It was enough when everything else felt like it was falling apart. She was enough.

“Are you ever going to forgive Teti?”

“Maybe. One day. Not today. This, what I was doing with Dr Brown-”

“Flirting.”

“Yes, that,” he coughed. “It's part of the healing progress.”

She gazed at the door to the examination room doubtfully. “It sounds like breaking a bone a second time.”

“Sometimes you have to do that. If your bone breaks and it heals wrong, they break it again to set the wound in order for it to heal correctly.”

“It sounds painful.”

“Yes,” Will agreed. “Most things are.”

For the next hour they sat there, their hands intertwined as the fluorescent lights flickered above them. Eventually Abigail fell asleep, her head nestled against Will's shoulder as if he was the best pillow in the world. Will remembered nights that he had stayed with her like this, kneeling beside her bed as she settled after a nightmare. *Don't leave me*, she'd said that first time, and her place in his heart became a fixed point. *Never, he'd promised. But in the end he had lied. Poor Abigail. This time he would do better.*

“Hey,” Dr Brown whispered, and Will realised he had zoned out staring at where his hand with it's white mark was clasped over Abigail's slender digits.

“How is Winston?”

“He's fine. I removed the piece of bone and cleaned the wound. It's superficial so just keep an eye on it that it doesn't tear over the next few days and try and keep his mouth clean. An impossible task, I know, but he's never trusting with you. You must be a good person to be able to develop such a deep bond with a stray.”

“He thinks so, but he's a bit daft in the head sometimes.”

“I don't think he is. Come on, I'll take him to the car and you can take her.”

Will gently untangled himself from his daughter and lifted her up. It wasn't as much of an effort as lifting Winston who was muscle where Abigail was waning baby fat. She didn't wake, even in the cold air, and Will was grateful to realise he'd forgotten in his rush to lock the car door. Hannibal would have chastised him, but then Hannibal wasn't there. Will carefully placed Abigail in the front passenger seat and closed the door at the same time as Dr Brown clicked the trunk closed.

The silence was surprisingly alive.

“Thank you,” Will said, breaking into the tension.

“Of course. Any time,” Dr Brown said, and shook Will's out stretched hand. When he withdrew it Will realised that he'd left his card in Will's hand. He could only just read the front of the card. Matthew Brown, it said, not doctor. This was his private number.

“I mean it Will, any time!” Matthew called as he hovered in the doorway of the building.

Will flushed and hide his smile behind the frame of his door as he settled himself in the vehicle. He quickly opened his wallet to hide the card from Abigail just in case she woke, and his thumb grazed the zipped pocket that held only one thing. His smile faded as the outline of his marital ring reminded him of all the reasons this was a bad idea. He put the car in gear and drove away, to return to his husband.

End Notes

Teti = dad (Lithuanian)
Tevas and Tetis = other words meaning father/dad, but there is grammar involved! I did look this up, so I can only apologize if I used them wrong. Let's just say I tried! Rather than attempt to explain how these words are used, in case I get it wrong, I'm just leaving this here to remind anyone when I do use the words what they mean,

This is according to research on Google so may be inaccurate. If so, I apologize!

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